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EXPERT OPINION

Language & Ethics in Transgender Health

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Trans-specific language has evolved tremendously in the past decade, also reflecting a move away from a binary model for gender identity toward one that acknowledges gender diversity. Many of us who are professionals working in the field of transgender health frequently witness colleagues deviating from recommended best practices for working with transgender and gender diverse people by using language that is outdated, disrespectful, and pathologizing or engaging in ethically unsound research or reporting of data. Examples include terminology that overemphasize someone's birth-assigned sex, use of "biological" or "normal" as adjectives, not consistently using appropriate names or pronouns that align with someone's gender identity, and even lack of consent, for example, for use of photographs in presentations or articles. Conflation of transgender women with (cis) men who have sex with men is rampant in the field of HIV research and transgender men are often categorized as "females" in the fields of gynecology and sexual health. We recently found a conference poster on transgender women in the "male sexual dysfunction" category. Despite publications that underscore the importance of language policies and ethical standards, these incidents continue to occur.

Authors and their readership should be aware of recent updates to the current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders from the American Psychiatric Association and the International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Revision from the World Health Organization that use language that is non-pathologizing, while at the same time providing access to needed care.[1] In 2017, the World Professional Association of Transgender Health and the European Professional Association for Transgender Health issued new language policies for conferences and publications.[2] The overarching goals were to promote "respect, dignity, and equality" for trans people and provide details on correct terminology, terms to avoid, and a call to collaborate with trans communities to ensure that language use is relevant and appropriate.

Since then, other language-related or ethics-related articles have been published.[1–5] These have had a far-reaching impact outside of transgender-specific journals and meetings. Several conferences, such as the International AIDS Conference and the Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections, now include instructions to researchers to disaggregate data by sex/gender and to use correct terminology with regard to sex and gender. In response to a recent article published in The Journal of Sexual Medicine, the journal's editorial board will soon include language guidelines in the author instructions. We hope these examples will be followed by other journals and conferences.

We are aware that harms to transgender and gender diverse participants and/or patients and clients who engage in research are usually unintended and likely a result of deficits in knowledge, skill, or awareness on the part of researchers. It is important that anyone who intends to conduct research in these communities avail themselves of the current level of understanding related to ethical trans research and published research policy.[4–6] One of the key tenets in these guidelines is the need to involve the transgender community at all stages of research, from inception to dissemination, and as part of the steering committee or research advisory group.[5,7] Acknowledging the internal diversity within the transgender community is vital in this process, and it should include voices from the most marginalized within the trans communities. Blind spots, hidden populations, power dynamics, and potential bias can be avoided to a large extent when this approach is taken.

But, the effects of correct language use go beyond the need for researchers to be ethically correct. Using respectful and non-pathologizing language is important for scientific rigor and linguistic choices that play an important role in engendering community trust and future participation. Correct terminology also has a profound impact on the mental health and social acceptance of trans people and their families, on the relationship between healthcare providers and their patients, and on increasing general awareness in society on trans issues. As has recently been emphasized in the *European Society for Sexual Medicine Position Statement*,[8] it is important to address trans people with their correct pronouns and names. Research has shown that using the person's chosen name is associated with lower depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior.[9]

To conclude, all researchers, authors, editors, publishers, review boards, and conference organizers working in the field of transgender health have a responsibility to move past pathologizing structures and should ensure that research is methodologically and ethically sound and that it takes into account complex contextual and cultural factors. The Journal of Sexual Medicine's inclusion of trans-specific language guidelines in the "instructions to authors" is appropriate but is long overdue. This is another step toward increasing professionalism and expertise in transgender health care.

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